



BASIC INFORMATION

DESCRIPTION

A completely irregular heartbeat rhythm. Fibrillation means a quivering of heart-muscle fibers. Involved are the heart muscles; the atrium (also called auricle), a chamber of the heart that connects to the left ventricle (main chamber); and the heart's electrical conduction system.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- No symptoms (sometimes).
- Continuously irregular heartbeat, in which no 2 beats are of equal strength or duration.
- Weakness, dizziness or faintness (sometimes).

CAUSES

- Rheumatic heart disease caused by rheumatic fever.
- Atherosclerosis of coronary arteries, with or without a previous heart attack.
- Hyperthyroidism.
- Congestive heart failure.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- Stress.
- Heart valve disease; recent heart surgery.
- Electrolyte disturbances, especially low potassium.
- Pulmonary embolism.
- Excessive use of some drugs, such as thyroid hormones, caffeine and others.
- Smoking.
- Excess alcohol consumption.
- Obesity.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- Don't smoke.
- Follow suggestions under Diet. Children and young adults of parents with this condition may benefit from a low-fat diet.
- Exercise regularly.
- Reduce stress to a manageable level when possible.
- If you have diabetes or high blood pressure, adhere strictly to your treatment program.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

- A normal heartbeat rhythm can be restored with electrocardioversion in about 50% of patients. In the other 50%, some symptoms can be controlled with medication.
- Those whose rhythm is restored to normal have a longer life expectancy, greater strength and more energy than those who have continuing atrial fibrillation.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Acute pulmonary edema.
- Arterial thrombosis or embolus.
- Congestive heart failure.
- Other heartbeat irregularities that could trigger cardiac arrest.



TREATMENT

GENERAL MEASURES

- Diagnostic tests include ECG (electrocardiogram that measures electrical activity of the heart) and blood studies to measure levels of drugs used in treatment.
- Hospitalization (sometimes).
- Electric shock (electrocardioversion), which may restore normal rhythm.
- Have family members and friends learn cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) in case you have cardiac arrest.
- Don't smoke, use mind-altering drugs or drink more than 1 or 2 alcoholic drinks, if any, a day.
- Learn to check your own pulse for rate (beats per minute), rhythm (regular or irregular) and strength. Call the doctor if these change.
- Minimize stress.
- Avoid non-prescription decongestants.
- Additional information available from the American Heart Association, local branch listed in telephone directory, or call (800) 242-8721.

MEDICATIONS

- Heart medications, such as digitalis, quinidine, calcium-channel blockers or beta-adrenergic blockers to regulate the heartbeat.
- Anticoagulants to prevent blood clot.

ACTIVITY

- Resume your normal activities as soon as symptoms improve.
- A regular exercise program is recommended.

DIET

- Lose weight if you are obese, but don't use appetite suppressants. These may worsen rhythm disturbances.
- The underlying heart condition may require a low-salt or low-fat diet and potassium supplements.



NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- You or a family member has symptoms of atrial fibrillation.
- The following occur during treatment:
 - Change in heart rate, rhythm or strength.
 - Chest pain, sweating and weakness.
 - Shortness of breath and swollen feet and ankles.
 - Pain in the calf of the leg while walking.
- New, unexplained symptoms develop. Drugs used in treatment may produce side effects.